MR Review Essay

Tibetans: Cold War Orphans

by Lewis Bernstein

John Kenneth Knaus' book *Orphans of the Cold War: America and the Tibetan Struggle for Survival* is a tale of arrogance, ignorance, intrigue and decision makers who did not care about the practical consequences of their decisions because what was practical did not fit into their conceptions of the world.[1]

In our culture, Tibet has long been a symbol of inaccessibility. It is Shangri-La—the home of a Buddhist pastoral and romantic myth. In our idealized view, Tibet is a land of peace, harmony and tranquillity—utopia—a place that is truly nowhere. Several enlightening books and films have recently documented renewed Western interest in Tibet and Buddhism.

In the 14th century, large numbers of Tibetans converted to the Yellow Hat sect of Mahayana Buddhism, a reformist group stressing discipline, celibacy and temperance and worked to rid Buddhism of the earlier gods and devils of the native Tibetan religion, Bon. The sect's head was the supreme pontiff, the Dalai Lama. By the 16th century, the sect held religious and temporal power and began to isolate Tibet from outside challengers to their rule.

By the last quarter of the 19th century, Tibet had become a pawn in a three-way imperial struggle for power and influence in Central Asia among Russia, China and Great Britain. The Chinese state, Qing or Nationalist, retained its suzerain power through the first half of the 20th century, even though it could not exercise it in any meaningful way. Between 1912 and 1950, Tibet was a de facto independent state.

It is important to note that there is both a political and an ethnic Tibet. The former is the area called the Tibetan Autonomous Region, while the latter includes the political and extends into the neighboring provinces of Qinghai and Sichuan, which have Tibetan minorities.

Knaus, who spent 44 years as a CIA operations officer, has written a readable, bleak, depressing but always interesting account of US policy toward Tibet since 1943. His goal was to provide a narrative of the US government's relations with Tibet in a socio-political context since World War II, concentrating on the period of greatest US involvement from 1959 to 1974. He also presents an evaluation of that policy and his own role in it. In fact, one wishes he had gone into greater detail about his role—aiding Tibetan guerrillas against the Chinese between 1956 and 1968.

This book is partly an apologia and an act of expiation, written to "alleviate the guilt some of us feel over our participation in these efforts, which cost others their lives, but which was the prime adventure of our own." As he states, his "prime adventure" ended with the guerrillas dead, in prison or in exile.

Although personal, the book rests on a broad foundation of British and American sources. The interviews were with key Tibetans—those who survived the CIA's aid—and US participants. But the book is primarily about US foreign policy, successfully striking a balance between Tibetan and US views. Knaus does have a certain reticence in telling of his own involvement, and that is unfortunate, but for all we know that may have been the price of publication.

Part of the book's fascination is the way Knaus presents the various actors. For example, CIA Director Allen Dulles admired Desmond Fitzgerald, the official who ran the Tibet operation, because he had "imagination and sense of daring, backed by his credentials as a fellow Wall Street lawyer and his impeccable social connections, coupled with his ability to get things done." Apparently Knaus, along with Dulles and Fitzgerald, saw "their" Tibetans as "oriental versions of self-reliant, straight-shooting American frontiersmen." The reader is left with the horrible realization that the entire operation existed partly in reality and partly in the realm of fantasy.

The times, of course, were eminently suited for this type operation. The Eisenhower administration's favorite foreign-policy tool was subversion (in Italy, France, Iran, Guatemala, Indonesia, Vietnam), and the Chinese regime in Beijing was believed to be a duplicate of the Soviet regime in Moscow. Any effort to undermine and challenge communist hegemony in Asia was welcomed.

Knaus presents the participants' dilemmas in a sympathetic light, emphasizing the difficulties they faced and the solutions they tried. In doing so, he underlines the quixotic nature of the enterprise as well as the arrogant ignorance underlying it.

The ad hoc nature of the operation is evident because, in Knaus' own words, he "stumbled" into it. Engaged to lecture Asians on Soviet Russian and Chinese collaboration, he discovered he was speaking to Tibetans. He immediately surmised that lecturing on this subject to this audience would serve as much purpose as telling them about the War of the Roses. After what he called "this surrealistic day," he helped the Tibetans devise ways to explain their goals to their countrymen.

Other difficulties ensued, including the lack of maps and firsthand CIA experience in Tibet. CIA trainers also failed to understand that Tibet is not monolithic. There are regional as well as class cleavages within the society. They also did not comprehend that Tibetan Buddhism was the basis of their nationalism and their way of life, not merely their religion.

The trainers' worst difficulty or illusion was that the US-trained Tibetan guerrillas would be able to mimic Maoist guerrilla warfare strategy and move among the people as

fish move in the sea. This may have been true had the Tibetans been independent fighters, but they were herders and family men. "The only way these men could have survived as guerrillas would have been to abandon their defenseless dependents and move in small bands to remote mountain outposts." This was, to say the least, impractical.

Nevertheless, the guerrillas did have some successes. They killed Chinese soldiers and captured documents that enlightened the agency about the condition of the People's Liberation Army in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward. Success was short lived, however. By the end of 1959, the Chinese sent an army to Tibet and, using air power, cavalry and armor, destroyed the guerrillas. This should have spelled the end of the program, but since admitting defeat would have been seen "as a personal failure and a threat to the continuance of the whole program," the CIA continued its active support for the next 15 years.

Knaus portrays the Dalai Lama's victory as being a moral one—the Tibetan government is still viable and Tibetan culture, so inextricably intertwined with Tibetan Buddhism, also thrives, albeit in exile. Further, the rest of the world has an idea, however sketchy, of the uniqueness of Tibetan civilization far beyond being an obscure footnote in a history of Han Chinese colonialism.

The book shifts locations from Lhasa to Dharmsala to New Delhi to Washington and back. Knaus tells of commitments made, honored and broken, presenting a picture of the shifts in foreign policy during the administrations of five US presidents, from being profoundly anticommunist to advocating engagement.

The reader also sees how the Nationalist Chinese government on Taiwan viewed Tibet. While strongly anticommunist, it wished to preserve the rights of the Chinese government established in the 18th century.

In the end, the Tibetans' fate resembles that of the Kurds or Vietnamese, peoples whose usefulness was gauged only as a measure of a larger power's interest in a region. Indeed, the betrayal the Dalai Lama feared did occur. In Knaus' judgment, "It no longer served US purposes to support [the Dalai Lama] as a challenge to China, a country [it was] now courting. The altruistic motivation . . . was always secondary to other objectives. In the end, the Tibetans became the worthy but hapless orphans of the Cold War."

At the end of the book, Knaus piously hopes something might be "harvested" from President Bill Clinton's remark to President Jiang Zemin that he and the Dalai Lama begin a "dialogue." When this subject was brought up again during Clinton's visit to Beijing, it is said that Jiang openly laughed. Indeed, the Chinese government routinely refers to the Dalai Lama as "the criminal Dalai." When a high official in the Nationalities Ministry was asked how the Dalai Lama's reincarnated successor might be discovered, he replied that when the Dalai Lama died he would remain dead.

The specialist in the history of colonialism and imperialism will experience a shock of recognition reading this book. Parallels between various colonial and imperial forms are uncanny. China's current Tibet policy, reflecting a systematic rationalization of the way the state and society is organized, is exactly the same process undertaken in Southwest China and Taiwan in the 18th century. Boundaries were rigorously surveyed and marked, and territory was explored, mapped and measured. Administrators with armies were sent to control the local inhabitants, change local societies and rationally extract resources from them. The administrators used sophisticated tools such as censuses, cadastral surveys and education to measure, count, separate, classify and apply lethal force as needed.[2]

For the past 50 years, the People's Republic of China has engaged in a colonization policy based on imperial precedents designed to sinify (that is, modify by its influence) the portions of Central Asia it controls. However, it faces a dilemma. Tibet, Qinghai and Xinjiang lie outside of what has been traditionally called China proper, and the native inhabitants have no love for the Han Chinese. In fact, these areas were only brought under Qing imperial control 250 years ago. Since 1911, Chinese governments have seen the boundaries of the Qing polity as the boundaries of China.

The Tibetans, as well as other nationalities, face the dilemma of all small nations. Powerful outsiders will help only as long as it serves their wider purposes. Knaus' book highlights this unpleasant foreign policy truth as it relates to US policy toward Tibet. I highly recommend this well-written book. It explains a portion of contemporary history that is too little known but which will be reported on extensively in the future. ***MR***

NOTES

1. John Kenneth Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War: America and the Tibetan Struggle for Survival* (New York: Public Affairs Press, 1999), 416 pages.

2. A brief comparative survey of the varieties of colonialism and imperialism dealing with some of the themes mentioned is Michael Adas, "Imperialism and Colonialism in Comparative Perspective," *The International History Review* (June 1998), 371-388. The entire June 1998 issue of this publication is devoted to articles on Manchu colonialism.

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